



# Playing Chicken

Chicken can help c-stores edge out the competition.

BY CECELIA BLALOCK

**W**hat did you eat during Super Bowl XLVIII? If you said chicken wings you're in plentiful company. Americans consumed an estimated 1.25 billion wings during the game. And that doesn't count nuggets, tenders, and other finger-food chicken.

"Bottom line: We all love chicken—it's truly America's favorite protein," says Denny Woodward, director of sales, Tysons Food, Convenience Store Division, of Springdale, AR.



New from Brakebush are Tater Chip Tenders.

How much do we love chicken? USDA estimates that in 2014, U.S. per capita consumption of chicken will reach 85 lb. That's well ahead of beef at 54 lbs. and pork at 47 lbs. Consumption has increased nearly every year since the 1960s as red meat consumption declined. As more and more c-stores look to foodservice as a way to compensate for declining tobacco and gasoline sales, chicken is a natural—and profitable—addition.

"Chicken is on practically every menu in America," notes Woodward. "If chicken isn't on your menu you have to ask yourself if you are serious about being in the foodservice business."

Many c-store operators are still adjusting their business mindset to a foodservice model with which they may be largely unfamiliar. The more expansive the foodservice offering the more labor, faster turnover, and attention to detail are required.

"They've got to change the whole concept of their operation," says Chuck Watkins,

foodservice director for the Charles C. Parks Co., a grocery distributor based in Gallatin, TN. “You have to run it like a restaurant.”

Distributors who offer a workable program suited to the individual store greatly increase their value to the retailer. The result is a tighter working relationship and more sales for all.

You get a customer who is dedicated to you and will stay with you in other areas of product sales, Watkins explains.

“Chicken is one of the top, if not the top, product lines c-stores can carry,” he says “It has a huge impact on sales and profits. It probably will produce the highest sales.”

Chicken is the ideal choice for a foodservice program, agrees Steve Ross, marketing manager for Brakebush Brothers Inc. of Westfield, WI. It complements pizza and sandwich programs to round out a strong foodservice offering. Brakebush should know. Chicken has been its focus since two brothers and a truck started the business in 1925. Today it offers a full range of chicken products including its popular Squawkers brand.

“Chicken is the lowest cost protein,” he says. “The profit potential can be in the 60–65 percent range for most applications.”

In addition to healthy profits and wide appeal, chicken has one characteristic of particular importance to c-stores: versatility.

Chicken can be offered a multitude of ways—as an ingredient (sandwiches, salads), as finger food (nuggets, tenders, strips, wings), as a meal (whole chicken or breast). It can be breaded, fried, baked or pressure cooked. Chicken partners well with a wide variety of sauces, broadening its appeal to many different tastes. It also works for any daypart.

“Chicken biscuits make for a great filling breakfast on the go, tenders can serve as an afternoon snack, and larger party pack sizing can serve as home-meal replacement or catering for an event,” observes Gina Trammell, special products coordinator for Chester’s International of Birmingham, AL. “It’s a nice, warm alternative to the cold sandwich options.”

Mindful of the growing breakfast segment, Chester’s is working with retailers to develop or expand their breakfast offerings as a way to grow business.

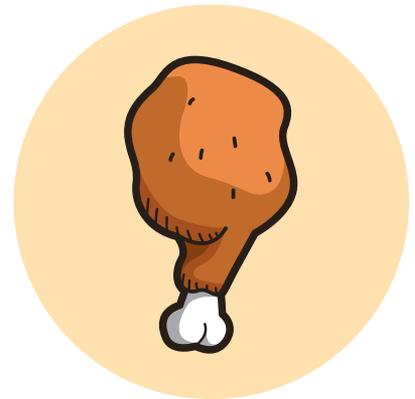
## Branding Important

It’s important to have a branded chicken, Watkins says. When you have a branded chicken it becomes a specialty that makes the retailer more attractive to the customer. It also lends itself to comprehensive marketing.

Charles C. Parks has its own chicken brand in Cluckers. It offers a complete turnkey chicken concept and program, providing everything an operator needs. The distributor helps design the program, offers training classes for the retailer, and provides an operating checklist. Marketing materials include mini-boards, signage, boxed packaging, napkins and sauce cups all bearing the Cluckers brand. It’s almost like a franchise, notes Watkins. It’s a good option for c-stores that can’t afford a franchise from one of the larger chicken companies.

The c-store often becomes the local chicken place, he says. This is especially true in rural areas where there may be fewer quick serve options. People come for lunch and the store develops into a grocery store/restaurant for many. They’ve had a lot of success that way, says Watkins.

Chester’s works closely with distributors and sees them as vital to maintaining brand integrity and ensuring retailer success, says Trammell. Chester’s



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Chicken is an essential element in a c-store foodservice offering.
- Branding is important.
- Chicken is extremely versatile and has wide audience appeal.
- Sauces offer new flavor profiles.
- Distributors play a crucial role in developing and maintaining a chicken program.

supplies retailers with proprietary menu items and relies on its distributors to see that retailers get the products they need without interruption or delay. Distributors also are a great source for identifying prospective new retail clients or providing the supplier with information to help better serve the retailer.

### More, Better, Different

Chicken programs continue to evolve, reports Woodward. Much of the change centers around extending the product portfolio available to c-stores. He cites Tyson's new line of chicken bites which come in buffalo, home-style or golden crispy as a good example.

Boneless wings, chicken bites, and chicken sandwiches are extremely popular, Woodward says. "If it's portable and pop-able it's sellable!"

Chester's Emerging Products division develops and creates new products, processes and go-to-market solutions, says Trammell. Among its initiatives is their fully integrated digital signage program that offers automated promotion dayparting, increased frequency of limited time offers and dynamic graphics. In line with the trend toward allowing consumers to customize their choices, Chester's launched



Tyson chicken bites are tasty alone or with sauces.

six Signature Seasoning Spices which can be added to a menu item or used when slow-roasting chicken.

Sriracha Bites, fully cooked, whole muscle boneless wings with Thai chili is a new offering from Brakebush. Also new is its Tater Chip Tenders, chicken tenderloin coated with crunchy potato chips.

"These kinds of items will set the c-store apart from its fast food competitors," Ross predicts.

Sauces and sauce cups in a variety of flavors are helping to drive the category by appealing to different tastes. Tenders are all about the sauce these days, according to Watkins.



### Pre-cooked or Fresh?

Given the frequent turnover in c-store staffing, handling is often a concern in foodservice. That can be particularly true for poultry.

Squawkers chicken arrives fully cooked and can go from freezer to fryer or oven, cutting down on prep time and alleviating concerns with serving under-cooked product, reports Ross. With limited staff to prepare the product, the easier it is, the faster it can be prepared and served.

In fact, many c-store chains require the product to be fully cooked upon delivery to their stores, notes Woodward. That makes it easier to handle it properly.

But there are other options. Watkins acknowledges that some c-store operators are afraid of fresh chicken. But others realize they will get a bigger impact from fresh and are willing to go all in with the necessary equipment, labor, training and handling procedures.

Frozen product offers decent quality if it goes out immediately, Watkins explains. But it deteriorates quickly, within 20–30 minutes, not in terms of safety but in drying out. Fresh chicken prepared in a pressure cooker can be held for as much as 2 hours without drying out because the pressure cooking adds moisture.

A current trend is for new flavor profiles that appeal to different tastes, such as Brakebush's Sriracha Bites.



“Fresh is definitely the way to go in terms of quality and appeal,” he says. But it requires a different mindset. Operators must focus on consistency, quality and cleanliness. “It’s a people investment. You may not make any money at first. If you stay the course with standards you can do very well. The profit potential is huge.”

Watkins believes that c-stores can compete successfully against quick serve chicken outlets. While burger joints may be a dime a dozen, there are fewer freestanding chicken places.

“The environment in a c-store lends itself to fried chicken,” he explains. “It fits well in the c-store industry based on customer profiles. Tenders work well, as do hot wings and 8-piece varieties with dipping sauces.”

He estimates that an operator can get into a moderate, complete chicken program for about \$25,000 though it can be done for \$15,000. Not insignificant, but modest compared to the cost of a franchise. And the ROI is outstanding.



Customizing chicken to suit any taste is easy with Chester's spices.



Chester's eye-catching Digital Menu Board can change to suit the daypart.

Space is always a prime consideration for c-stores. Foodservice can take up a lot of real estate. Chicken's requirements are relatively limited, depending partly on whether fresh or pre-cooked produce is involved. It can be displayed in a hot box and often works well positioned next to pizza or other hot items.

## What's Ahead?

“The growth options for chicken within the c-store segment are endless,” says Trammell confidently.

Beef and pork prices will continue to rise, predicts Woodward. Chicken prices will too, but the pressure will be less because of greater supply. The foodservice category as a whole in c-stores will continue to grow and with it chicken.

As consumers begin to see c-stores as a primary source for ready-to-eat chicken, the demand for healthier items will increase. Oven-roasted options and other healthier chicken options are emerging, says Watkins.

Branding is becoming stronger and consumers are making the connection between their local c-store and the chicken brand they know and trust.

The sky definitely is not falling when it comes to chicken in c-stores. ♦

*Cecelia Blalock, a regular contributor to Convenience Distribution™, is based in Jessup, MD.*

## RESOURCES

**Charles C. Parks Co.**, Gallatin, TN; (615) 452-2406; [www.charlescparks.com](http://www.charlescparks.com)

**Chester's International LLC**, Birmingham, AL; (800) 646-9403; [www.chestersinternational.com](http://www.chestersinternational.com)

**Brakebush Brothers Inc.**, Westfield, WI; (800) 933-2121; [www.brakebush.com](http://www.brakebush.com)

**Tyson Foods**, Springdale, AR; (800) 248-9766; [www.tysonconvenience.com](http://www.tysonconvenience.com)